

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or are wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, then contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard type can help us provide more accurate advice.

Tom Royal

Our Labs Editor can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Which graphics card will play the game?

Q My computer is struggling to play the latest games. It uses a Leadtek K7NCR-DC-NFORCE2+ motherboard, 512MB of DDR400 memory and an AMD Athlon XP 3000+ processor. Currently, it has a 128 Radeon 9800SE All-In-Wonder graphics card. Can I upgrade the graphics card on its own or would I need to change any other components, and which graphics card could I buy?

Steve Auraob

A We couldn't find a K7NCR-DC-NFORCE2+ listed on Leadtek's website, but we did find several nForce 2 Socket A motherboards that could be the same as the one in your PC. All these boards have an AGP 8x slot for graphics cards. Our Best Buy AGP 8x graphics card is Inno3D's GeForce 7800GS and our Budget Buy is Sapphire's X1600 Pro.

You should be able to upgrade the graphics card without changing other components in your PC, but



▲ Inno3D's GeForce 7800GS is our Best Buy graphics card for computers with an AGP slot

remember that your All-In-Wonder card also contains a TV tuner. If you're using this, you'll need to replace it with a separate tuner when you upgrade the graphics card. Check that you have a free PCI or USB port ready to install a tuner before you upgrade.

Fax and figures

Q Our printer has stopped working so I need to buy a new one. I need to print, scan and copy documents but I don't need to fax. So far I have looked at several MFPs, but they all have a built-in fax facility. Can you recommend a suitable product that doesn't have a fax?

Sandy Tubby

A Two of our recommended MFPs don't have a built-in fax. If you're looking for something simple and inexpensive, we recommend Canon's PIXMA MP160. This won a Budget Buy award in *Labs, Shopper*, January 2007. It costs less than £50 including VAT, is fairly cheap to run and produces sharp scans and prints.

If you want to print photos, however, then it's worth spending a bit more. Canon's PIXMA MP600



▲ Canon's PIXMA MP600 produces excellent photo prints and has no fax

won our Best Buy award in the same test. It costs around £120, but is cheap to run and produces excellent photo prints.

Do I need a TV tuner card?

Q I'd like to be able to watch Sky television from other locations using the internet, and I've heard that there are Location Free TV services that can do this. Where can I buy these services?

I'll also need a new notebook on which to watch the TV channels. Do I need to find a notebook with a built-in TV tuner?

Linda Harris

A Location Free TV services allow you to send television from your home to a computer via a broadband internet connection. We know of two products that are currently on sale: Sony's Location Free and Sling Media's Slingbox. The Slingbox is our Best Buy as it works well and is easy to use. It usually costs around £180 from www.amp3.co.uk, but as we went to press at least one store was selling it for around £150.



▲ If you use a device such as the Slingbox, you won't need a separate TV tuner

The Slingbox sends the television signal from your Sky box to your notebook digitally via a broadband internet connection. This means that there's no need to have a TV tuner installed in the computer you're using to watch the programmes. Instead, you simply need to install the Slingbox's player software. This requires a computer with 256MB of RAM, 100MB of disk space and Windows 2000 or XP.

Can I upgrade to dual core?

Q I would like to upgrade my computer to use a dual-core AMD Athlon 64 X2 4800+ processor. It uses an ASRock 939NF4G-SATA2 motherboard. Will I be able to upgrade to this new processor and is there anything I need to do to prepare?

Rod David

A According to the ASRock website, the 939NF4G-SATA2 motherboard supports the AMD Athlon 64 X2 4800+ processor. This dual-core processor is supported by every revision of the motherboard's BIOS, so you shouldn't need to upgrade your BIOS for it to work. Upgrading is easy; remove your existing processor then fit the new one and its heatsink.

Which document scanner?

Q I work for a small financial services company. Despite all the advances in electronic documents, the insurance industry continues to generate vast amounts of paperwork. The rules we work under specify that we are never allowed to throw this paperwork away, so you can imagine how it builds up. We are considering moving to a system where these documents can be scanned and kept electronically, so we need to buy a scanner.

Some of the documents we need to scan are up to 30 pages long, and these need to be kept as one computer file rather than a single file for each page. I understand we'll need a scanner with an automatic document feeder and appropriate software. I've tried to buy something suitable, but asking the staff in high-street computer shops for advice is like banging your head against a wall.

Speed is not particularly important, as it is likely that we will need to scan only three or four documents per day. Our current Epson AcuLaser 900 laser printer will need replacing in the next few months. Would it be a good idea to buy a multifunction peripheral, such as the Brother DCP-8065DN reviewed in *What's New: Printers, Shopper* December 2006, or should we buy a separate printer and scanner?

Keith Smith

A We like Brother's DCP-8065DN laser MFP. Its automatic document feeder can hold 50 sheets of paper and, as it has an Ethernet port, everyone on your office

network will be able to use it. Its scanner isn't particularly good at higher resolutions, though, so if you need to scan documents with very small print it might not be suitable.

If you want to scan lots of pages quickly, you should consider buying a dedicated document scanner. At over £300, Fujitsu's ScanSnap fi-5110EOX2 costs almost as much as Brother's DCP-8065DN and it doesn't include a laser printer, but it can scan both sides of 15 A4 pages in a minute. Its software converts the pages to a convenient PDF file, and even rotates any pages that are scanned upside down. If you're scanning three or four documents a day, and each one runs to 10 or 20 pages, this kind of rapid scanner could save you lots of time. It would be particularly good if you decide to convert your existing library of documents to PDF files.



▲ The ScanSnap can scan both sides of a document directly to PDF

Which wireless router will work?

Q I want to connect my three computers to the internet wirelessly. I use AOL's Silver ADSL broadband and I understand I need a wireless router. I have asked in various shops, but I've been told this may cause a few problems. I'm confused. What wireless router should I buy?

Mark Pearce

A In the past, AOL used a set of rather unusual internet connection settings that made it tricky to set up a wireless broadband connection. Today, though,

this is no longer the case. AOL provides a list of supported wireless routers, which you can find at <http://tinyurl.com/yy6lor>. AOL will sell you one of its supported routers for £59, plus a £2 delivery charge. For more information, use the AOL keywords broadband extras.

Alternatively, you could look for a cheaper wireless router. Any standard ADSL wireless router that supports PPPOE should work with your AOL broadband connection. However, unless you buy one of AOL's supported routers, you will not be able to get technical support from AOL.

Speak easy

Q I need to find a suitable microphone with which to record speech. I would like to record myself reading some stories so that my daughter can listen to them.

Both my notebook and desktop computer have 3½mm microphone input jacks. I've tried recording using a headset that was included with an old copy of IBM ViaVoice. However, I found that the microphone has to be right in front of my mouth to get a decent recording level, and it picks up my breath at the end of phrases.

A quick look online suggested that a unidirectional handheld microphone can be obtained for less than £10. Might one of these be suitable? I'd be happy to spend a little more, but no more than £35.

Nick Caulfield

A It is possible to buy a microphone for only a few pounds, but if you want to get decent sound quality you will have to spend more. A budget musician's microphone, such as the Behringer XM8500, usually costs around £20. Unfortunately, this kind of microphone is not easy to plug into a computer because it uses an XLR connection rather than the 3½mm mini-jack plugs used by very cheap microphones.

In order to plug one into your PC, you'll need to connect it to a preamplifier then connect the preamplifier to a line-level input on your sound card. The integrated sound chips built into many desktop and notebook computers don't usually have a line-level input, so you'd need to add a better sound card as well. The total cost could come to around £100.

A good alternative is M-Audio's Podcast Factory. This kit includes a condenser microphone and a preamplifier that connects directly to your computer via USB. It's designed especially for recording speech and it's easy to use. Unfortunately, at £85 it's well above your budget. If you can't spend this much, we recommend buying a condenser microphone with an integrated USB interface. These have a built-in preamplifier and USB sound card, so you simply plug them into a free USB port.

Samson's C01U produces a warm, pleasing sound and costs around £60. The Samson Q1U isn't as good, but it should sound better than the headset you're currently using. Conveniently, it costs around £35. ☑



◀ You can now buy a condenser microphone that connects directly to your computer via USB